Dealing with the Devil

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Dealing with the Devil

by SingingInTheRaiin

Summary

First, Will Graham died. Next, he made a deal where he would be returned to life for one year, in which he needs to enter a relationship with his 'true love' if he doesn't want to die again (He neglects to mention that he doesn't believe in true love, and is just going to use his one year to catch the Ripper). Then, everything goes very differently than Will planned, and it turns out that the real devil was a lot closer to him all along than he'd ever have suspected.

Notes

I don't know anything at all about cooking fancy food, so I just googled stuff and hoped for the best lol

When Will blinked and opened his eyes, he wasn't entirely sure what he should be expecting. Based on his most recent memories, he suspected that a hospital bed and an annoying influx of visitors was probably his fate. But while he couldn't identify his exact location, Will at least knew that he wasn't in any hospital.

He was actually standing in his favorite fishing stream, and when he turned to look, he thought that he could spot his dad's old beat up truck parked next to the house they'd occupied when Will had been in middle school. It had definitely been one of his favorite homes. But there was no logical explanation for why he was there in that moment.

Will stepped out of the stream, but felt surprisingly light as he walked forward. He glanced down and saw that his clothes were completely dry, despite where he'd just been standing. This was only getting more and more strange. Perhaps there would somehow be answers in that house? Or perhaps he'd go in there and find his dad waiting for him?

It was as good a guess as any. Will reached for his gun, but it wasn't there, so he just straightened his back, and began walking. Whatever was going on here, Will was determined to get to the end of it. After a couple of minutes, though, he could hear very soft steps behind him. Too many to be a person.

Will quickly turned around, and his eyes widened as he stared up at the creature that had started following him. It was a giant black stag, with blood red eyes that held a scary amount of intelligence in them. Though if Will weren't mistaken, there was also some surprise in there. But Will decided that since this was probably all just some weird dream, he was probably wrong about that part. The stag didn't open it's mouth, but suddenly there was a deep voice echoing around in Will's head. "William Theodore Graham. I suppose you're wondering what is going on right now."

There was no fear of his mind being read, at least for the moment, since that's what literally anyone would be thinking about in this bizarre situation. "Yeah, that would be nice to know, thanks."

The stag snorted once. "You are in your death. While you were investigating the murders of all those women, you found a trail, and you followed it. You were shot three times. And then like the stubborn creature you are, you held on in a great deal of pain for several minutes before passing away."

For a moment, Will considered the idea that he really was just dreaming. But he didn't think that his subconscious would ever make up something like this, since he'd never been a particularly religious man in the first place. And besides that, even if it was a dream, it still felt very real at the moment. "Shit, I can't be dead yet. I still have so much unfinished business." How could Will ever forgive himself for leaving before the Chesapeake Ripper had been caught? He didn't want to be egotistical, but he was pretty sure that he was the only one who'd be able to catch the serial killer, and stop anyone else from being hurt by him.

A strange gleam entered the stag's eyes, and it tilted it's head, though it continued it's strange way of speaking straight into Will's mind. "I hear that all the time. What makes you any more

special then all the others who want to return?"

Will clenched his hands into fists, and forced himself to stay calm. He knew that getting upset wouldn't help his situation at all. And he couldn't help noticing that the stag's words sounded almost challenging, as though it would be helpful if he could come up with an answer that it wanted to hear. "You don't understand. I need to-"

"Confess your feelings of true love?"

Will blinked a few times as he tried to understand why the stag had just interrupted him. "...What?"

The stag took a couple of steps closer to Will, and it towered over him. "How about you and I make a little deal?" It leaned even closer, and there was no mistaking the way that it inhaled right from his neck. He shivered at the strangeness of the situation, but remained silent so that he could hear what the stag had to say. "I have the power to send you back to the land of the living. Of course, I would never do such a thing for free, but the truth is that I have a bit of a fondness for true love. So how about this: I send you back, and you have one year to enter a romantic relationship with the man you love. If you succeed, you will get to live out the rest of your natural life with your lover. If you fail, though, you will return here in a painfully brutal fashion, and you will be my consort."

Will couldn't help taking a step back. "I'm sorry, but what?"

"You heard me. That's the only offer you're going to get, and I refuse to make any amendments to it. Take it or leave it, Will Graham. Do you believe that you have the ability to be with the man you love, or are you so sure that you're unloveable that you'd rather stay here and not risk anything at all?"

It seemed like a reasonable enough deal. It would give Will more time to hunt down the Ripper, at least. Even if he never tried to get into a relationship with anyone, he would have an entire extra year to catch the serial killer. Though there was the issue of what would be expected of him as this stag's consort.

The stag impatiently raised one of its front legs, and then stomped it down onto the ground, while letting out a huff of warm breath. "The offer expires in ten seconds, so take it or leave it, Will Graham."

This whole situation felt entirely surreal. Will could just stay here and investigate the house, and live by his favorite river for eternity. Or he could go back into the messy real world, where bad things were always happening. To most people, it wouldn't seem like much of a choice at all. But Will knew that he had an obligation to protect everyone that he could, so he nodded once. "Fine. I accept your deal."

Even though it was only a stag, it was somehow able to display a creepy grin all the same. "Have fun with your year. Most people don't get a second chance like this, so if I were you, I wouldn't waste it." Then it turned and trotted away, leaving Will to stare after it. He wondered what he was supposed to do now, but then everything went completely dark.

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When Will opened his eyes again, he immediately recognized his surroundings. He was lying on the ground of the driveway next to the house that he’d gone to investigate. After four different lesbian couples had been murdered, everyone had assumed that it was a hateful misogynistic man. But then Will had come to the conclusion that it was actually a woman. After doing a little more digging, he’d figured out why. She was a lesbian, or had been at some point, but it had been brutally beaten out of her. She killed those other couples from a combination of believing them to be disgusting sinners, and being jealous of them being happy together when her sexuality had brought her nothing but misery.

There was a slight tenderness in the back of Will’s head from where he’d hit the ground, but over all, he felt pretty good for a guy who’d supposedly been shot three times. Had that all just been some crazy dream after all? It hadn’t felt that way at the time, but then again, most of Will’s dreams felt like they were real.

He got up, brushing some dirt off the back of his clothes, and then he slowly began to look around. He was in the exact same place that he’d been in before his strange dream. Maybe he’d been ambushed and hit in the back of the head or something? Well, there was no point in worrying about that now. All Will needed to worry about was finding the killer.

Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on who was asked, it was very easy to find the woman who’d killed ten other women. She was just around the back of the house, and she’d clearly shot herself in the head. He did a quick pulse check, but it only confirmed that she was dead.

Will pulled out his phone, narrowing his eyes in annoyance at the crack on the screen that hadn’t been there before, and then he called Jack to tell him about everything that had happened. Or at least everything as far as Will knew. He decided that it would be best to leave out his odd dream, and just mentioned that he’d been hit in the back of the head. Of course that wouldn’t explain why he’d fallen backwards, but it still made more sense than thinking that he had actually died and then come back to life without even needing to go to the hospital.

When Jack and the others finally showed up, they quickly investigated everything, and found that the scene, for the most part, matched Will’s description of what had gone down. They all headed back to the office so that Will could write up his official report, and then Will headed straight home. He needed a drink, or two or three, and then a good night’s sleep. Only one of those things were within his ability to control, so he decided to at least get himself drunk after making sure that the dogs were all taken care of.

He hadn’t planned on arriving home only to find Hannibal’s Bentley parked outside. He sighed, not looking forward to any human interaction at the moment, and headed into his house. He regretted not getting his key back from Hannibal after asking the man to look after his dogs during one case or another.

As soon as he stepped inside, he could smell the delicious scent of whatever it was that Hannibal was cooking, and Will suddenly decided that he was in a rather forgiving mood. It was a lot easier to forgive Hannibal for the intrusion when he could do it with a full stomach.

He walked into the kitchen, and arched one eyebrow as Hannibal turned to look at him. “I didn’t realize you made housecalls, doc.”

Hannibal quirked up one side of his mouth. “Only for you.”

Will shifted uncomfortably on his feet, not really sure what to say to that. So he decided to just change the subject. “So what possessed you to suddenly drive all the way out here?”

“It couldn’t possibly be a desire to spend time in your company, could it, Will?”

Something about the way that Hannibal said his name made Will feel like he was experiencing deja vous, though he couldn’t think of why, since it was a common enough way for Hannibal to address him. Before he could think about it harder, Will’s phone rang. He was surprised to see that it was Beverly. Though they were friends, or at least as close to friends as Will would ever want with another human being, it was rare for her to reach out to him for no reason.

He answered, and Beverly began talking without even giving him a chance to get out a greeting. “Will, were you injured at the suspect’s house and stubborn enough to try and hide something like that? Because I’ll have you know that I refuse to be the one who-”

Will quickly cut her off. “I told you guys that I was hit, and that’s all that happened. Why?”

There was a long pause before Beverly answered. “You’re sure that you weren’t seriously hurt?”

“Positive. Bev, what’s this about?”

She sighed. “Well it started earlier, when Jimmy thought that there was too much blood at the scene to just belong to Ross, so we ran a few basic tests, and found a dangerously large amount of blood from a secondary source. We would’ve been standing around and squabbling about it all day, except for the fact that you’re in the officers’ database, so it was pretty easy to see that it was a match. But there’s no way you could lose that much blood without even realizing it. You should be dead right now.”

At those words, a shiver ran down Will’s back. Maybe his bizarre dream from earlier wasn’t just a dream after all. He could feel Hannibal’s eyes on him, but he was too busy trying to think about the ramifications of everything he’d seen being real. He ignored the way that the psychiatrist was watching him as he dashed towards the downstairs bathroom, dropping his phone somewhere along the way.

As soon as he slammed the door shut and locked it behind him, Will fumbled to unbutton his shirt. When that took too much effort, he just tore it open, not caring about the way that buttons broke off and scattered everywhere. He looked down at himself with wide eyes, and then turned to stare at his body’s reflection, just in case his eyes were somehow completely incorrect.

But the mirror showed him the exact same thing that he’d just witnessed for himself. Across his chest, just a few centimeters away from his heart, was a pale starburst shaped scar. And

when his gaze slid downwards, he could see two similar marks, one on his side and one almost directly in the center of his stomach.

While he stared in horror, wondering how the hell it was possible to die and then make a deal with what had to be the devil, there was a polite knock on the bathroom door. “Will? Is everything alright?”

No, everything was not alright. Will had died. He’d been dead just a few hours ago, but now he was alive, and nobody knew it except for him. And nobody would ever know it, because they would never believe him. It would be just another strange hallucination from his unstable mind. And he couldn’t think of any appropriate reason to tear his shirt off in company to find out whether he was just seeing those, or if those scars were truly there.

And there’s no way that Will could explain any of that to Hannibal, so he just sighed, and reached over to flush the unused toilet. “Yeah, everything’s fine. Just didn’t time things out very well, is all. It’s a pretty long ride home from the office, you know.”

For a moment, he was worried that Hannibal wouldn’t believe him, and would continue to stand there and badger. So he was pleasantly surprised when Hannibal just told him that he was making some tea that he might want to give a try. Once the older man was gone, Will quickly assessed the situation. He rebuttoned as much of his shirt as he could, and then waited until he couldn’t hear any more of Hannibal’s footsteps before he made a mad dash for the stairs, running into his bedroom and slamming the door shut behind him. He couldn’t find it within himself to be even remotely bothered by what Hannibal must be thinking of him at the moment.

Will quickly changed into a new shirt, and shoved his old one into the bottom of his laundry basket. He would have to hunt around the downstairs bathroom for the missing buttons, but then he would be able to repair it, and everything would be fine. Well, not everything, obviously, but at least the shirt would be fine.

Will sank down onto the edge of his bed, and lowered his head into his hands. If everything that he’d dreamed about was real, then that meant that he only had a year to live, because there was no way he was going to be able to date anyone well enough to convince the devil that they were his ‘true love’. Will didn’t even believe in such ridiculous concepts. So there was no point in wasting any time on the romance part of the deal. All he could do now was catch the Ripper before the year was up. At least then he’d be able to die knowing that he’d done something truly useful. As for the other thing, about being the devil’s consort, Will decided that there was no point in worrying about that right now, since it wouldn’t be relevant until he died again anyways.

Okay. So Will had a year to find the Chesapeake Ripper before he died a horrifically painful death and married the devil. That wasn’t so bad. It could be worse, anyways. And something that Will hadn’t really noticed before was that his head felt clearer than it had in a very long time. He didn’t feel the need to gulp down Advil, and he couldn’t remember taking any all day, despite everything that had happened. Will wasn’t even sure that there had been something wrong with him before- according to Hannibal, stress and trauma could have all kinds of detrimental effects on the body- but if there had been something wrong, was it possible that that had been healed as well?

Given that he had such a limited amount of time to figure everything out, Will was grateful to have a clear head for what felt like the first time in forever. He knew that he'd need to spend the entire year focused only on capturing the Ripper. Nothing else mattered, except for perhaps the more minor cases that popped up in the interim. But none of his relationships with other people, or hobbies, or anything else mattered, because none of those things would matter at all at the end of his one year. In fact, it was probably best to distance himself from everyone else. He wasn't sure if there was anyone would be totally crushed if he were to die, but it would be best not to encourage it anyways.

After taking a few minutes to get his thoughts into order, Will went back downstairs, and found that Hannibal had cleared off the table so that it could be set to look like a proper meal. His stomach growled loudly, and Will wondered if dying took a lot of energy, or if he'd just forgotten to eat anything else that day. Or perhaps it was both.

He sat down, and offered Hannibal a grateful smile. "Thanks. This looks amazing." The psychiatrist dipped his head down once, and there was a prideful gleam in his eyes at being complimented on his art. Hannibal would probably be the hardest person to stay away from. Not only because the man was very persistent, and hadn't yet been chased off by any of Will's rudeness or lack of social skills, but also because Will found that he usually actually enjoyed spending time with Hannibal. But he couldn't let himself be drawn in. The only reason Will could have for letting anyone stay close at this point was if they were his 'true love', which would give him a lifetime long extension to catch the Ripper. And Hannibal wasn't someone that Will could ever picture being with in a romantic sense. Will snorted as the thought crossed his mind that if- when- he found the Ripper, that would probably be as close to true love as he was going to get. And considering that the Ripper was a serial killer, Will found that thought to be as sad as it was amusing.

Hannibal cleared his throat after a few minutes, and tilted his head as he looked at Will curiously. "What has you so amused?"

It would probably be best to not mention to the psychiatrist that he was even considering having such a close bond with a murderer. Especially one he'd never met before. Instead, he just shrugged with one shoulder, and finished the bite that was in his mouth before he spoke. "I was just thinking about in movies and books, when someone has a near death experience, they usually wake up and suddenly want to live a better life and do everything much differently than before." He paused there, unsure of how to continue without sounding like a crazy person who had supposedly been shot multiple times earlier that day and was already feeling alright. "It just seems a little unrealistic, is all."

Hannibal stared at Will, but somehow, his usual comforting look felt different. Will furrowed his eyebrows as he tried to figure out why exactly this scene felt strange compared to the many other times the two men had dined together, but nothing immediately came to mind. Maybe dying had messed with him more than he'd thought. He almost laughed out loud at that. Was it possible for a person to die and not be a little messed up? And that wasn't even taking into consideration the fact that Will had been pretty messed up before dying too.

When it was obvious that Will wasn't going to elaborate on his thoughts, Hannibal just shrugged, though he almost seemed... bothered? -not quite the word, but something along

those lines- that Will was unwilling to share. Which was strange, because in the past, Hannibal had always been very supportive whether Will wanted to talk or not. He decided that he was probably just tired and not in any condition to properly understand the situation. Hannibal had always been difficult to read anyways.

They finished eating pretty quickly after that, and then Hannibal insisted on helping with the cleaning up before he headed out. “I will see you on Thursday, then?”

Will nodded. “Yup.” Once Hannibal was gone, Will went straight up to bed, and collapsed onto his mattress without even bothering to change his clothes first. Which was probably a bad idea, since he was more likely than not to sweat through them and make them completely unwearable without being washed first, but he felt too tired to get back up. But it would be really uncomfortable to have his pants glued to his legs with sweat, so after another minute of internal debate, he managed to summon enough energy to at least wriggle out of his pants and then toss them aside. Then he closed his eyes, and quickly drifted off to sleep.

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When Will woke up, he was back in the stream, and once again when he got out, he hadn’t gotten wet at all. He looked around in confusion, wondering if perhaps being alive again had been the dream and this was real. Then the stag showed up, and it somehow seemed smug. “Even in your sleep you desire nothing more than to be by my side. A year will pass by so quickly, and then you will make a wonderful consort for me.”

Will frowned. “You sound awfully confident. Are you trying to imply that you don’t think I’m lovable enough to snag the ‘man of my dreams’?”

The stag snorted. “The fact that you didn’t immediately go running into his arms to confess his feelings doesn’t bode well for you.”

“How would you know, anyways, if I was with my true love, versus if I was with someone else?”

The stag walked closer to Will, inhaling his scent like it couldn’t get enough of him. “Are you asking for some kind of hint? As though you can’t even divine your own soulmate without help? Don’t worry, I’m well aware that you didn’t return to life just for romance. But that doesn’t change the rules of our deal. Romance is the only thing that will save you. And the person who is meant to be with you, darling boy, will be someone who will certainly make it a bloody and violent courtship. I’m sure that you simply cannot wait for such a thing.”

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Going to work the next day was certainly a strange affair. Everyone in the lab kept giving him strange looks. After several minutes passed in awkward silence, Brian made his way over to Will, looking him up and down. “Would you be super opposed to the idea of a quick examination? Just to make sure that you’re really okay?”

“I already told Beverly that I wasn’t injured yesterday beyond a small knock to the head. I don’t know why that’s so difficult for you to understand.”

Brian frowned. “Maybe because we found a big enough pool of your blood that you should be an empty, bloodless corpse right now. At least let us take a quick blood sample so that we can see where the data fucked up?”

Normally Will tried to be accommodating with the lab rats, since they all needed to work together in relative harmony to get their jobs done. But if he did give a sample of his blood, all it would prove was that the original data was absolutely accurate, which would only bring up more questions than Will felt he could answer.

Luckily, Will was saved from having to reject the request for blood work by Jack storming into the room. He somehow managed to perfectly combine urgency and feeling bad as he shouted at them. “Alright guys, I know we just wrapped one up yesterday and you’re all tired, but we’ve got three bodies on the ground overnight. Let’s move, people!”

Will was glad that he hadn’t even bothered to take off his jacket as he followed everyone out of the lab. They all stuffed themselves into the big black SUVs, and rode out to the crime scene. Or one of them, anyways. Apparently the three bodies were not in the same location, but had all been done similarly enough to cause suspicion.

The first body was decapitated. The head was missing, and the body was propped up against a wall with a little orange resting on the neck stump, and a face had been drawn on it in sharpie. The body had also been arranged so that the arms were crossed over the chest, and Will couldn’t help thinking that this felt so very whimsical for a grisly murder. And there wasn’t a large pool of blood lying around.

At first, the first responders had assumed that the person had been killed somewhere else and then moved to this location, and had moved the other bodies into their spots as well. But a closer inspection revealed bleach and cleaner across the nearby walls and floor. The killer had killed their victim here, and then gone through all of the trouble of cleaning up the blood to the point where the room looked nearly spotless. There didn’t seem to be any kind of logical explanation for why someone would do that, and waste so much time where they risked being caught.

Will had trouble getting into the killer’s headspace in such a limited amount of time before Jack dragged them off to the second scene. It was almost identical, except a watermelon had been used instead of an orange, and it had rolled onto the ground and cracked open. There was also still the full amount of blood present, and it didn’t look like someone had even attempted to clean up, though the lack of proper placement of the fruit made it look like they were in a hurry. Will was almost certain that it was a different killer than at the first scene.

The third scene was more similar to the first, though with an apple instead of an orange, and the face had been carved into it instead of drawn on it. And the hands on the body had been carefully moved to form a two-finger salute. Will thought that this was a third, separate killer.

They all headed back to the office to discuss the strangeness of it all. The estimated times of death for all three bodies were within half an hour of each other, which wasn’t enough time

for a single person to get to all three locations. And Will explained that each scene felt like it had been done by a different person.

Jack got riled up at the thought of some kind of murderous death cult in Baltimore. It was the last thing that they needed on their hands. He and the others didn't seem to understand the funny part about the scenes, so Will tried his best to explain it. The three killers had obviously known each other and planned this out together, but they'd done it to amuse themselves more than anything. And the first scene, where the blood had been cleaned up, had probably been from the killer feeling bad, and realizing that he didn't want to be a killer, or that he at least regretted killing that particular person. Though Will didn't think that the victims had been personal. They seemed to have been random choices, most likely based off of who had been unlucky enough to be in the area at the time.

Once they'd all gone over the facts of the case, they'd been dismissed to do their individual work. Will wasn't sure what else he could do at the office, so he decided to leave. It would be rude to drop by Hannibal's unannounced, but he also got the feeling that Hannibal might actually understand the humor of the case. He wasn't sure why he thought that, but in general, Hannibal seemed to have a rather dark sense of humor.

Will headed to Hannibal's office, though he sat out in the waiting room instead of knocking on the closed door. Even he had a limit to how much he was willing to inconvenience others. He waited there for about half an hour before the door opened, and Hannibal walked out with his patient, who thanked him quietly before hurrying away.

Hannibal gave Will his usual friendly smile. "I was not expecting you today."

Will stood up, and wiped his slightly sweaty hands against the sides of his pants. "I know, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude if you're busy or anything. I just wanted to talk, but I can come back another time."

"Don't be silly. You're already here, so you may as well stay and chat. I don't have another client for over an hour, so that's plenty of time for you to get whatever's bothering you off of your chest."

Originally, Will had intended to come by and discuss the latest case, even though it was technically illegal to share so many of those details. But now that he was actually here, Will knew that there was something much more upsetting still on his mind. And Hannibal might think he was crazy, but at least the older man wouldn't say anything out loud along those lines, no matter how much he believed it to be true. And Will just didn't think he could hold it in anymore. It had only been a day, and he already felt like he was going crazy with the secret of his death.

He followed Hannibal into the office, and they both sat down in their usual seats. Hannibal crossed one leg over the other, and then gave Will another smile. "So what is it that you wanted to talk about?"

"Do you believe in an afterlife?"

If Hannibal was surprised by the question, he didn't show it at all. "Wouldn't our lives be too miserable if we believed that there were ever a point when we were permanently gone? To think that someday you may close your eyes and be vanished from existence, with only an eternal darkness and no consciousness to speak of? I believe that human beings need the idea of an afterlife, if only so that they can feel less fear in this current life. Why do you ask?"

A week ago, Will would've accepted that as an answer and moved on to answer in return. But right now, all he could think about was that Hannibal had very clearly not said anything about whether he personally believed in an afterlife. Of course Will couldn't recall verbatim every conversation they'd ever had before, but he had to wonder if this was the first time Hannibal had so cleverly deflected or not. It certainly sounded too smooth to be the psychiatrist's first time. But what could Hannibal possibly believe about life after death that he felt Will couldn't handle knowing? Unless it was perhaps too personal for Will to know? But then why not just tell him that, instead of avoiding the question?

Maybe he was just being paranoid, but everything about his latest interactions with Hannibal just seemed off for some reason. He felt like he was looking too far into things, but once the idea crossed his mind that there was something fishy going on, he couldn't make the thought go away. He'd been about to confide in Hannibal about his whole death experience, but now he wasn't sure that it was such a good idea. It's not like he and Hannibal knew each other very well, so it wouldn't be the end of the world if he stopped telling all his secrets to the man.

Will abruptly stood up. "I'm sorry, but I just remembered that I forgot to feed the dogs this morning, so I should really get going to do that right now."

It was a pretty obvious lie, since at this point, Hannibal had to know that Will would never do anything to potentially harm his pack, but Hannibal was polite enough to not call him out on it. At least his politeness was one thing that Will could actually count on, since everything else about Hannibal suddenly seemed so out of character. Or maybe just out of the character that Hannibal had created for the world to see.

Hannibal nodded once. "I understand. You wouldn't want anything to happen to your precious animals."

Was Will serious going crazy, or did Hannibal sound almost jealous? Of what, though? Of Will's dogs? But why? Maybe Will really was just going crazy. He decided that it would be best to ignore his crazy thoughts for now. It would be best to focus all of his attention on capturing the Ripper. Hannibal was small beans in comparison. Hannibal got up to walk Will to the door, where he stopped for a moment and leaned forward, almost like he was sniffing Will. It wouldn't be the first time such a thing had happened, but Will had stopped wearing that awful after shave weeks ago, so there was no reason for Hannibal to feel the need to smell him up anymore. None of this was making any sense.

Will hurried out of the office, out into the parking lot, and then into the driver's seat of his car. What was happening to him? Why did he suddenly feel as though he couldn't trust Hannibal at all? Will groaned, and decided that he was going to catch the Ripper, and then deal with the consequences of being the devil's consort, whatever that entailed, without thinking anymore about Hannibal Lecter.

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The next few weeks passed by surprisingly quickly. Will figured out where to find their killer cult, which was in a college dorm room together. They’d been jokingly told that murder was required to join the fraternity that they wanted, and they’d taken it too seriously. All three of them cooperated and let themselves be taken away in handcuffs when they were caught.

It wasn’t until a week after the arrests that Will realized he’d already wasted an entire month of his year, and still wasn’t any closer to figuring out where to find the Ripper. He’d been avoiding Hannibal- subtly at first, but now in the least subtle ways he could think of, because man, that guy could not take a hint.

Will glared at the calendar that was hanging on the wall in his kitchen. A year had seemed like enough time before, but now that a month had passed, he was starting to rethink that. As awful as it sounded, he almost hoped that the Ripper would kill someone else, if only so that Will would have something to work with. He growled under his breath when he couldn’t think of anything else to go off of to find the murderer.

He was startled by the sound of the front door opening, and Will quickly reached out to grab a dirty kitchen knife. Then he slowly peered out of the kitchen, and his shoulders slumped down when he saw that it was just Hannibal. “What are you doing here? And how did you even get in?”

“I’m terribly sorry for the intrusion. You should really learn to start locking your front door whether you’re home or not if you don’t want people to simply walk in.” His eyes flicked down to the knife in Will’s hands with something akin to amusement. Then he tried to meet Will’s eyes, though Will focused on Hannibal’s nose instead. Hannibal held up a cloth bag. “It is unfortunate that it’s been so long since the last time that we were able to dine together. And I know that you can sometimes get so lost in your own thoughts that you forget to feed yourself, so I thought that a meal together would solve both of our problems.”

Will sighed, annoyed that he was being ambushed in his own home while he’d been trying so hard to avoid Hannibal. But there was nothing to be done about it now, because there was no way to kick the man out without seeming like a total ass. And to be perfectly honest, Will’s stomach was clenching from hunger, and he knew that he always enjoyed the food that Hannibal made. So maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to make an exception to his avoidance of the older man. Even if there was still a weird feeling in the air.

Will nodded for Hannibal to follow him into the kitchen, and was grateful when Hannibal didn’t say anything as Will dropped the knife back down into the sink. “So what are we having today?”

Hannibal smiled as he set his bag down on the counter, and then began pulling containers out of it. “Seared beef heart with blueberries, caramelized onions and grated horseradish, and traditional Korean tongue soup.”

Will couldn’t help arching one eyebrow at that declaration. “You really do like working with offal, don’t you? Well, I’m sure that it’ll be as tasty as everything else you’ve served before.”

There was an unrecognizable gleam in Hannibal's eyes as he nodded once. "Yes, I certainly do hope that that is the case. I do intend on giving you a more developed palate whether you'd like one or not."

Will snorted, and then opened the cabinets to pull out plates and glasses. "If you're expecting anything but water to drink, you're out of luck."

Hannibal was clearly surprised by that statement, which made sense, since Will usually had a wide selection of whiskeys and beers to choose from. "Oh?"

"Got rid of my whole stash. Turns out that being an alcoholic is bad for you." Of course Will had done no such thing, but he was greatly amused by the strange look on Hannibal's face. Clearly the man had been thrown for a curve, and that so rarely happened, especially now that Will was doing his best to avoid him.

After a few seconds, Hannibal dipped his head down once in a quick nod. "Luckily for me, I did bring a bottle of wine that I thought would go well with the meal. Though if you are serious about staying sober, I am in full support of that, and will happily drink water with you."

Once the table was set, and the smell of cooking meat was in the air, Will's stomach actually growled loudly enough for both men to hear it, and his face flushed pink with embarrassment. "Sorry about that," he muttered. "Busy day."

"Then it is fortunate that I chose today of all days to come and bring you some real food." He served everything a couple of minutes later, and Will had to admit that it looked really good. A few months ago, he would've been slightly grossed out at the thought of eating organ meat, but he'd gotten used to it thanks to Hannibal, and he was pretty sure that Hannibal was capable of making literally anything taste good.

When they'd both finished eating, there was an awkward silence between them, and of course Will wasn't going to offer to pour any after dinner drinks. Hannibal seemed to actually pick up on the hint that he was unwanted, which did make Will wonder how many times the man had simply pretended to be oblivious that he was being kicked out.

But he didn't have to worry about it for very long, because Hannibal got up and left, wishing Will a goodnight, and politely enquiring about whether or not Will would actually be at their meeting this week. Of course Will wasn't planning on being there, but he agreed that he would, and decided to come up with some other excuse later on.

With Hannibal gone, Will sank down onto his couch, and let his dogs all nudge up to him and offer comfort. What the hell was wrong with him? Hannibal was just trying to be a good friend who looked out for him, and he was being downright rude to the man. When he was around Hannibal, he got those strange vibes, but as soon as the guy was gone, Will would question what he'd felt. Maybe he should consider getting a headscan to make sure that everything was as okay up there as possible.

"

The next morning, Will was woken up by the shrill sound of his phone going off, and he grouchily snatched it up off his bedside table, groaning when he saw that it was only four in the morning. It figured that now that he was getting better and better quality of sleep at night, he was also getting woken up in the middle of it more often.

He answered the call, and held the phone up to his ear, even as he closed his eyes again and tried to convince his body that it was still asleep. "'Lo?"

"Will, we think it's the Ripper." That's all Jack had to say to get Will to bolt up out of bed, and scramble to get dressed. He didn't get the chance to bombard Jack with questions before there was a gruffly said address, and then Jack hung up.

Will swore under his breath as he practically ran through his entire morning routine, though he didn't bother to even trim his beard or brush his hair. Then he poured out food and water for his dogs before rushing out the front door, not bothering to grab any breakfast for himself. There would always be time to eat later. For now, he had the more important task of catching the Ripper to focus on.

As he drove, it occurred to him that his surroundings looked very familiar. He ended up going past the BAU, but only by a couple of streets, before he stopped and parked next to the other police vehicles near a small grassy park. A lot of the FBI agents took their lunch breaks here because it was nice and gave them a change of scenery from the boring halls and paperwork that they had to deal with during working hours. It couldn't just be a coincidence if the Ripper had left a body in a spot so closely related to the FBI.

He flashed his badge to get past the yellow police tape, and then he walked over to where Jack was standing by the body. "Found by a junior agent who came to look for a sweater they'd left here yesterday," Jack grunted in place of a greeting. When Will didn't say anything, Jack just yelled for everyone to back away while Will worked.

Once everyone had backed away a reasonable distance, Will let himself really take in the crime scene. The victim was wearing a white blindfold around their eyes that had been stained rusty red from blood. When Will stepped closer, he could see that the body was actually nailed to the tree behind in, in a classic crucifixion pose. He was completely naked, and it was easy to see that his penis had been removed, and then put into his own mouth. There was a large cavity in his chest, and Will glanced back at the forensics people. He could figure out for himself that the heart was missing, since he couldn't see it, but he would ask them afterwards if there had been any other stolen organs.

Satisfied that he'd taken in all the details he could at the moment, Will closed his eyes and let the pendulum swing back and forth. When he opened his eyes again, the victim was already dead, having been killed elsewhere before coming here. As he nailed the man to the tree, he thought of Jesus supposedly coming back to life, and of other rebirths as well. He slashed the man's eyes and then covered them to make him double blind, because someone wasn't seeing something right in front of them. He took the heart, the same way that his own heart had been taken, by the same person who was so blind at the moment. Mutilating the genitals was more of a last second impulse. It was a move normally beneath him, but he needed to show how frustrated he was. Not wanting anyone to think he'd taken the penis as a trophy, he made a swap, and took the man's tongue before filling his mouth again.

Will opened his eyes and took a couple of steps back. Jack walked over and put one hand on his shoulder, though he didn't say anything, he just waited for Will to start talking. "I think this was the Ripper. But it's different than his previous kills. This was more… not emotional, necessarily, but more passionate. It's not about the victim, but about what he's trying to show. I think- I think that the Ripper has a crush."

"And this is supposed to be a courting gift?" The disbelief in Jack's voice was obvious, but Will didn't blame him for that. It was strange to think that someone like the Ripper could be human enough to get crushes.

Will just nodded. "I think so. There probably won't be any more evidence here than there was at any of his other scenes, but even so, he's getting sloppy to let us know so much about what he's thinking. If we can find this person who's caught the Ripper's attention, then we have a chance of actually finding the Ripper."

Jack sighed, then looked over at the body. "Do you think the next two are going to be courting gifts as well?"

Will shrugged. "Hard to say. Depends on whether or not he gets his crush's attention with this display, I think."

Everyone headed back to the lab, where the body was transported as well. Beverly and her team conducted the autopsy, and then reported that the cause of death had been strangulation, but there were no fingerprints on the victim's neck. Will zoned out a bit as the science geeks talked, but then something caught his attention. "-heart, and the tongue. What is he even-"

Will hopped off of the table he'd been sitting on as those words sank in. It seemed like it had to be impossible, and yet… Hannibal hadn't even tried to hide what he'd made. And Will hadn't thought to ask what animal the parts came from. It wasn't something that could be made any more obvious. But if Hannibal was really the Ripper, then he had to be smart to have avoided capture all this time. Will couldn't just go tossing around accusations without any evidence. But this would explain the strange feeling he got around Hannibal basically every time he'd seen him since his death.

Everyone stared at him like he was a crazy person as Will rushed away from the lab, but he didn't care. If Hannibal was really the Ripper, then it was Will's job to catch him as soon as possible, and then he could spend the rest of the year doing whatever he wanted to while he waited to die. This was the biggest priority. And to think that he'd assumed Hannibal was nothing next to the Ripper.

Will drove like a maniac to get to Hannibal's office, and he made sure that he had his gun loaded and ready to go before he went inside. He sat and somehow found it within himself to wait patiently for Hannibal to finish up with his current client. After what felt like forever, Hannibal escorted a young woman out, and she gave Will an odd look before hurrying away.

Hannibal had a small smile on his face as he looked at Will. "It's nice to see you again, Will, even if your visit is rather unexpected. Please, come in."

Will clenched his jaw, but followed Hannibal into the office. He was just glad that Hannibal hadn't expected him to walk in first and show his back to the enemy. Hannibal sat down in his usual seat as if it were just another ordinary session, but Will remained standing, if only to have at least some kind of advantage over Hannibal. "Did you feed me human organs last night?"

Hannibal only smiled in that infuriating way of his, and leaned back in his seat. "Why would you ask such a thing?" Of course it wasn't going to be as easy as Hannibal just confessing. Which made sense, since he'd always been the kind of person to say everything but what he actually meant. And if he confessed now, he'd be put in jail before he could finish wooing whoever that courtship gift had been meant for.

Will scowled, and balled his hands into fists. "You know exactly why I'm asking. You fed me heart and tongue last night, which is exactly what was taken from a body left by the Chesapeake Ripper. And I'm sure if I were to look back on all the times you had your fancy dinner parties, they would coincide with other Ripper kills. I should've trusted my instincts."

"Why didn't you?"

Why would Hannibal even ask that? If Will had followed his instincts sooner, than the killer would've only been caught sooner. "Something strange happened to me, about a month ago. I guess the easiest way to explain it is that I got knocked just a bit too hard in the head, and ended up having a bizarre dream. And when I woke up, everything felt just a bit different. Still don't know what could've been so wrong before that it made that big a difference to be fixed, but it felt good. Until I saw you, and then I got the strangest feeling that there was something odd about you, something that I'd somehow never noticed before. But I couldn't just go to anyone and say 'hey, I had a weird feeling about that guy, maybe we should arrest him' because that's not how the world works. I thought that just avoiding you would be enough. But then…" he trailed off as it hit him why the Ripper had suddenly struck again, and with a love note or all things. "You were trying to get my attention," he said softly. "You were upset that I wasn't thinking about you. But why would you want to…" *'Court me'* was how he finished that question in his head. He didn't want to say it out loud, though, because he wasn't sure what tone it would end up coming out as. And if he was wrong, then he would certainly sound like a total moron.

Slowly, Hannibal rose up from his seat, and took a couple of steps closer to Will. Without even thinking about it, Will took a couple of steps back. He didn't want to look like a coward, but his animal instincts screamed for him to stay as far away from the predator as possible. "Oh Will, why do you think yourself so unlovable?" Will furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. He didn't want the love letter to be for him, obviously. Hannibal took another step forward, and when Will stepped back he found himself in the unfortunate position of being pressed up against the wall, with nowhere else to run to. "You didn't even try to give love a chance, you just immediately assumed that it would be pointless, and a waste of your precious year."

When facing off against an apex predator, it seemed wise to give away nothing, because they could usually smell fear. But Will couldn't help it when his eyes widened in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

Hannibal took another step forward, and Will didn't think he could recall a time where he'd ever felt as trapped as he did right in that moment. Hannibal slowly reached out to lightly trace down the side of Will's cheek. "Did you really think that an entire year was too short a time for both romance and upholding the law?"

There was no way that Hannibal could be talking about what he was, and yet Will couldn't think of anything else that would make sense with what the psychiatrist was saying. "How do you…?" he couldn't think of a way to end the question without sounding insane.

Hannibal just smiled, and from the slight shift of his arm, Will knew exactly what was coming. Seconds later, Will had his gun pressed up against Hannibal's chest, while Hannibal held his scalpel so it was drawing just a bit of blood from Will's neck. "It would seem that we're at an impasse here, darling boy. I was hoping that I would have more time to woo you. I should've known that without the encephalitis messing with your thoughts, your clever mind would make all the connections too soon. I do rather enjoy my life here, but I am more than eager to experience our eternity together in your death."

He didn't need to ask, because at this point, Hannibal had made it obvious enough. Somehow, he was the stag that Will had made a deal with. Which meant that Hannibal was literally the devil, or something close to it. What business did the devil have wandering around on Earth, killing people and cooking fancy meals? Would the devil even be harmed by a human weapon like a gun? There was only one way to find out. And it was Will's job to put an end to the Ripper, even if it turned out that the Ripper wasn't exactly human.

Will managed to pull the trigger, firing a bullet directly into Hannibal's heart, in the same moment that Hannibal swiped his scalpel back, tearing it through the delicate skin of Will's neck. Will felt like he was drowning and on fire at the same time, but Hannibal caught him before he could collapse to the floor, and then they sank down together, with Will's head resting on Hannibal's lap. The man didn't even seem remotely phased by the bullet to the heart he'd taken. He seemed more upset by Will, though he didn't make any move to try and save him. He leaned over to press a kiss to the top of Will's curls. "I suppose that I'm changing the rules of our deal. But there were never any rules against such a thing, so you shouldn't have expected anything else."

There were a million things that Will wanted to ask Hannibal, but he couldn't force any words out of his mouth. When he tried, all that happened was that he could feel the wet warmth of blood dribbling down the side of his neck even faster. He knew that he only had a few moments of consciousness left, and then a few moments after that before he'd be dead. It was a good thing Will hadn't let go of his gun when he'd fallen.

It might not actually do anything, but it made Will feel a lot better to raise the weapon up, and fire right into Hannibal's face before he could even react to the threat. Then he dropped the gun, and his limbs all felt like they were full of ice, freezing and numbing him everywhere. Blood dripped down onto him from above, and then there was a fond sounding whisper that sounded like it was coming from miles away before Will drifted off. "You are truly extraordinary."

"

Will gasped loudly and flailed around when he woke up, though he quickly realized that he was back in the stream again. He closed his eyes for a moment to try and accept the fact that he'd been defeated by the Chesapeake Ripper. Jack would be so ruined when he realized that he'd lost two of his protegees to the same monster.

He looked around, and decided to just head towards the old house. This was his third visit to his death, and he hadn't even gotten the chance to fully explore it yet. He started walking, but after a few minutes, he could feel eyes on the back of his head, and he quickly turned around to see the stag there. He crossed his arms over his chest, and bit out angrily, "Why even pretend to look like that anymore?"

The stag snorted, and a moment later, shifted into the familiar face of Dr. Hannibal Lecter. "I can wear whatever suit I want. But if this is the one that makes you most comfortable, then it is the one I will don through all of our interactions."

"Why are you here? You cheated, and you didn't even give me a full year to find my- my true love. If you can break the rules, then so can I. I refuse to be your consort."

Hannibal chuckled. "I'd say that that seems like a fair exchange, but I was so looking forward to having you forever. We could always make a new deal. A new bet, a new gamble. New rules, new rewards."

Will stubbornly shook his head. "If you think I'm ever going to make a deal with you again, then you're even crazier than I thought you were."

Hannibal tilted his head. "But don't you want to remain alive, Will Graham? To be amongst your friends, and to care for your dogs, and to solve more crimes in order to save many more lives? You can't do any of those things as a dead man."

"You have to know that if you brought me back again, all I'd do is immediately arrest you and bring you to justice."

Hannibal smirked. "I'm not so sure about that, actually. I don't think I've just been imagining just how impressed you've always been with the Ripper's art. And even when you realized that you'd been eating human meat, your first reaction wasn't to attempt to vomit it all up, it was simply to confront me. And kill me, if necessary. You've already confessed that killing can feel good, and powerful, and that death can be beautiful. I have a proposal to make. We'll both go back, and you won't tell anyone who I am, and you'll get to go back to your life as if everything were still normal."

"Yeah? And what do you get out of that?" Of course Will wasn't stupid enough to make another deal, but he was a bit curious to know what all the terms of it were.

Hannibal took a few steps closer to Will, but this time Will didn't back up, because he was already dead and he didn't think that Hannibal could just kill him again. "I get to continue with my hobby. And I get to gaze upon you whenever I'd like. And perhaps someday you may come to appreciate my gifts more than you do now. And if you ever do speak to anyone about the truth of who I am, in any sense, then I will kill you, bring you back here, and make you my consort whether you wish it or not."

Will shivered at the clear threat in Hannibal's voice. Gone was the soft spoken psychiatrist who was a stickler for manners. In his place was an uninhibited being who wanted nothing more than to live a hedonistic life full of art, cooking, and murder. "What if I never tell anyone, and I die naturally when I'm 105?"

"Then I will visit you here everyday until you change your mind. I can be quite persuasive. And being my consort would grant you all sorts of power that you could currently only imagine. I would protect you in your life, and pamper you in your death."

Will didn't ever want to be stuck with the devil for an eternity. If he turned down the deal now, he had no doubt that Hannibal would visit him and pester him all the time until he agreed to be his consort. At least if he was alive, he'd be helping people, and catching bad guys. Well, all the bad guys except for one, anyways. And Will wasn't arrogant enough to think that he'd be able to find a way to defeat the devil. But he'd have an entire lifetime to himself, doing what he cared about. And now that he'd gotten a look at the true face of a monster, perhaps it would be easier to find others in the future.

After a long moment of hesitation, Will finally nodded his head once. "It's a deal, but only if you promise that you'll never kill another innocent person."

Hannibal blinked a few times, apparently surprised by the additional term. Then he grinned. "You never cease to amaze me. But do you really trust me to be the judge of who is innocent and who is not?"

That was a good point. Will frowned thoughtfully until he realized the answer that Hannibal was probably trying to lead him to. "If I… If I choose them, will you only kill those ones?"

"It would be my pleasure," Hannibal purred. "And then to watch you consume their flesh would be so very enjoyable. Are you ready to return to your life now?"

Will reached up for a moment to press one hand against the front of his neck. "I still have the scars from being killed the first time. If I suddenly show up with such a visible one everyone's going to have so many questions. Is there any way for you to fix that? People would probably find it at least a little strange if I go from perfectly smooth skin one day to a long healed scar the next. And I'm not really a big fan of turtlenecks."

He wasn't expecting to hear Hannibal laugh out loud at that. "Yes, I suppose I should have been more thoughtful with where I killed you. It was my mistake for not taking your stubbornness into account. I should've known you would refuse to be my consort. Don't worry, I'll do what I can for the mark. Though I doubt that I will be able to heal it completely, I can probably get it to look so small and faded that you could easily say that it had been there all along." He reached out one hand. "Now are you ready to return?"

Will didn't really feel very ready, but he knew that he was already more lucky than most people, since he'd gotten two chances more than everyone else. Then again, that second time had been one-hundred percent Hannibal's fault, so bringing him back now was really only fair. He took Hannibal's hand, and was surprised when Hannibal raised it up to kiss the back of it. Will rolled his eyes, and began thinking about all the things he needed to do once he was alive again.

He'd probably start simple, by just going home and playing with his dogs. Maybe he'd call Jack to apologize for rushing out of the lab so quickly. Maybe there would be a new case soon to work on so that everyone's mind would be off of the Ripper. And maybe, just maybe, Will might invite the devil over for dinner.

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